

GERALD EDWARD AYLMER, *Problems of method in the study of administrative history*, in «Annali della Fondazione Italiana per la Storia Amministrativa» (ISSN: 1127-2546), 1 (1964), pp. 20-26.

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*Problems of method*  
*in the study of administrative history*

BY  
G. E. AYLMER

Administrative history is one aspect of what Marc Bloch described as the «study of men in time». It is a mistake to claim too much for one's subject. The history of administration, especially if taken in its narrower, more old fashioned sense, may well seem rather tame, perhaps even a trifle dull compared with the dramas of high politics, the intensities of ideological conflict, the unfolding wonders of scientific and technical advance, the struggles of artistic and literary achievement, the inexorable but majestic lines of economic development, the warmth and colour of social investigation. All this may be true. Yet it is equally a fault to claim too little for one's subject. The newer way of studying administration, that is institutions and their individual members considered in their social context, affords particularly good scope to the historian for an approach which is at once rigorous in its handling of the source materials and human in its concentration on the part played by single individuals or small groups of men.

The primary concern of the administrative historian is with the relations between institutions and individuals, and with the connection between systems of administration and the society to which they belong. His work lends itself more to the treatment of personal and group characteristics than does that of the economic historian, with his abstraction of quantitative data from a very wide range of individual cases. Equally, it is capable of being more rigorously, and often more exactly treated than more strictly political, diplomatic or religious history.

The student of administration must always of course remember that Law Courts, Departments of State and other such institutions are no more than the human beings who comprise them. To forget this is to be in danger of erecting an institutional metaphysic - potentially as dangerous, at least academically, as a metaphysic of race or class. Yet at the same time, institutions do acquire some kind of corporate character of their own, with their own

customs, traditions, and vested interests, and systems of administration do play a historic role which cannot be fully and adequately explained simply by examining and analysing the attitudes and interests of the individuals — officials or others — who served in them. There is an insoluble problem here, which no administrative historian can ever hope entirely to overcome; but his failure is likely at least to be mitigated by an awareness of the difficulty, a recognition that it exists and cannot be conjured away.

The emphasis given in particular studies naturally reflects the interest of the historian, that is, how he has looked at the question. For example, English historians of English institutions of government in the period from, say, the 14th to 17th centuries are bound to approach these in a different spirit — and to ask different questions — than are, for instance, French historians approaching the study of French government during these same centuries. This does not prove that there cannot be a common series of questions to which administrative historians of different States or eras should seek answers from their respective materials, but it too is an obstacle which must be faced. Nor are national differences the only ones: the institutions of police and local justice in the 18th-19th centuries, for example, are likely to be approached differently according to whether one is an egalitarian socialist or a legitimist upholder of the *<Ancien Régime>*.

Is a sociology of institutions — and of bureaucracy — possible? To arrive at a positive answer here it is necessary to face a further difficulty, perhaps the most profound of all. The historian is limited, the utmost bounds of what he can aspire to achieve are set, by the nature of the evidence which has survived.

Broadly speaking this can affect the student of administration in one of two contrasting ways. If there is full documentation of the institution (be it a Court of law, a Council, a Department, or even a representative Assembly) and its activities, but little material concerning the lives of the individuals, both of those who served in the institution and of those outside who were affected by its activities, then a one sided picture will result. In this case, the historian's findings (whatever his own initial, innate bias) are likely to be overfavourable to the institution and the regime of which it was a part, to subscribe — even if unconsciously — to the attitude of what radicals in Britain today would call *<The Establishment>*. This has led some historians of left-wing or Marxist views to regard all administrative history as having an innate conservative bias. Certainly this danger exists, if the student of administration takes only the narrow view of how well the institution worked, by its own standards, instead of asking himself: what was its impact on society, on those who, one might say, were administered? He must also ask, and this takes us back to our central theme: how was that institution itself influenced, by its origins, by the social and ideological context in which

it operated, by the interests and outlook of those who staffed and maintained it? If, however, the records on the work of the institution are thin and its enemies, critics or victims have left ample and accessible materials behind, then a contrary danger exists. It is not just a matter of moral distortion but of false historical perspective which will distort our whole view of a society and an era. To give a specific illustration from my own field of studies: the conflict between the Puritans and the Anglican church hierarchy during the reigns of Elizabeth I and the early Stuarts (1558-1642) looks very different according to whether they are approached through the polemical writings of the Puritan opposition, the sermons and other literature which these men have left as their lasting memorial (most of those which are usually cited, in fact belong to the final Laudian period of the 1630s), or alternatively through the records of the ecclesiastical institutions of the two archbishoprics and the individual dioceses. Until quite recently many of these provincial and diocesan archives were inaccessible to students, while the Puritan tracts and sermons were there in print, in the British Museum and other libraries. But now it is possible to study the operations of the Church Courts in the most important northern diocese, that of York, and those of the <High Commission for Causes Ecclesiastical> of the northern Province<sup>1</sup>. Thus there is a danger of swinging too far the other way. The excitement and interest aroused by the discovery of new material may lead some historians to neglect the older sources and thus to present a picture which is unbalanced in the opposite direction.

The same point naturally applies to the study of secular institutions of government (and no doubt to that of private and corporate bodies in modern industry and commerce). To take one or two further examples from English history in the early-modern period: it is notoriously hard to present any balanced picture of the attitude of the <common man>, of the entire poorer half, or even three quarters of the population, who have left virtually no written records, and — after this lapse of time — only the slenderest and most garbled oral folk records, behind them. The evidence we have relates almost wholly to their pathology, not to their history. They come into official documents only when they were in trouble, charged before the courts with some legal offence, and into the literary records very seldom except when conditions drove them to insurrection or at least when there seemed to be a danger of serious disorder. We know that successive governments (that is the sovereigns and members of the Privy Council) under the Tudors and Stuarts were constantly worried about the possibility of large-scale social upheaval. We know that some regional and local risings did occur in the 16th century, and smaller riots against enclosures in the early 17th century. We know too that when

1. In the Borthwick Institute, St. Anthony's Hall, York.

a party with articulate, even intellectual, leaders did arise in the mid-17th century, whose programme included a broad appeal to the masses (if not to the very poorest, the propertyless, then at least to the small man, the < petit peuple >) they secured sufficiently wide support to make even Cromwell feel that his power was challenged. Yet after 1649 the power and influence exercised by the Levellers collapsed almost as quickly as it had arisen. Whatever the immediate cause of this: a failure to appeal to the peasants, the rectification of the soldiers' grievances over pay arrears and indemnity, a short-term improvement in economic conditions, it raises a doubt concerning the general temper of the masses, the degree of < revolutionariness > of their attitude. Perhaps from legal records we tend to see them as rougher and more lawless, less cowed and deferential than they habitually were. Perhaps from the expressions of fear on the part of the ruling groups we get an equally distorted picture. Indeed one document (which was first printed many years ago) illustrates nicely that even the royal Council could on occasion dismiss such fears as imaginary. Early in 1631 a rumour of impending insurrection was reported from the Midlands. According to a local clergyman, a shoemaker of Uppingham in Rutlandshire approached a poor man of a neighbouring village with the following proposition: « The poore men of Okeham have sent to us poore men of Uppingham, and if you poore men of Liddington will joyne with us, wee will rise; and the poore of Okeham say they can have all the Armour of the Countrie in their power within halfe an hower, and (in faith saith he) we will ryfle the churles ». But, the entry continues, « Upon consideracon had therof however this Board is not easily credilous of light reports nor apte to take impression from the vaine speeches or ejaculacons of some meane and contemptible persons. Yet because it sorts well with the care and providence of a State to prevent all occasions which ill affected persons may otherwise lay hold of under pretence and collour of the necessitye of the tyme... ». They therefore directed the local officials to inquire carefully into the alleged conspiracy, to take security measures about weapons in the locality, but also to see that there was an adequate supply of grain available at reasonable prices and employment provided for those who would otherwise be destitute<sup>2</sup>.

Dangers of misinterpretation can arise too from the character and content of the official sources themselves. Without careful analysis of the evidence it is very easy to ask impermissible questions of one's material, and so reach mistaken answers. To give an example of this danger being successfully surmounted, my friend and recent colleague, Mr. Penry Williams at the Univ-

2. Privy Council to Dep. Lieuts. & J. Ps. of Rutland, 15 Feb. 1630/1 (quoted in E. M. LEONARD *The Early History of English Poor Relief* (Cambridge 1900) 338-339; A. E. BLAND - P. A. BROWN - R. H. TAWNEY *English economic history: select documents* (London 1914) 390-391.

ersity of Manchester, has shown that the number of fines imposed for sexual immorality under the criminal jurisdiction of the Council in the Marches of Wales during the early 17th century was surprisingly high, compared with the number of cases actually heard. But it would be a mistake to infer from this either that fornication and adultery were markedly prevalent in Wales and the English border Counties at that time, or that a higher proportion of persons charged with such offences were found guilty and punished. The correct explanation, he has shown, is almost certainly that professional informers were especially active in this type of case, and many of the accused preferred — in effect — to plead guilty in advance, and come to terms with the officials of the court and the informer. In contemporary terms, they c o m p o u n d e d rather than incur the expense of a defended action. This also suited the judges and clerks, whose income depended on the collection of fees or gratuities from users of the court. Insufficiently thorough study of the sources and their limitations might have led a historian into erecting some high-flown theory here with no firm evidential basis<sup>3</sup>.

In using official records to develop a hypothesis about an institution, its staff or the historical context in which it operated, the first rule is to ask oneself what these particular records were intended for by the people who compiled them. The uses to which the historian can put them are not, of course, limited to those intended by contemporaries. In English medieval history, the intensive study of *Domesday Book* for the analysis of late Anglo-Saxon society disproves this at once. But the purposes of contemporaries, in compiling a given type of record, may set limits to its usefulness which the historian is bound to observe. Thus, for many English Counties in the age of Elizabeth and the early Stuarts, the < Subsidy Rolls > apparently come nearer than any other records to providing a < census > of the propertied classes, graded approximately according to their wealth. But the administration of this tax had fallen on such evil days, that even if its records might once have served this purpose, they can only be used very circumspectly and in conjunction with other sources for the later 16th or the 17th centuries<sup>4</sup>.

In studying public institutions and officials, either in a single society or on a comparative basis, no problem is more interesting or intractable, than that of corruption and official morality. How, if at all, the historian is to judge, whether he is to apply the standards of contemporaries, those of his own time or none at all: these questions take the administrative historian at once into the heart of the great debate about subjectivity and objectivity and about the role

3. P. WILLIAMS *The activity of the Council in the Marches under the early Stuarts*, in « *Welsh History Review* » 1 (1960-1961) 133-160, especially 144-146.

4. Although for the early 16th century, when the subsidy assessments were new and more realistic, it does seem perfectly legitimate to use them for these purposes, as has been done effectively by W. G. Hoskins and other historians in recent years.

of moral judgements in History. I do not wish here to say more than that the student of institutions must be aware of these issues and have thought about them. And that in itself disproves any jejeune notion that administrative history is < dry-as-dust >, removed from the flesh and blood of real life. A slightly more technical but equally vital problem is whether the cases which the historian finds revealed by his sources materials should be taken as a full exposure of all the serious corruption that existed in the system or institution concerned; or whether he should regard these instances as being like the < tip of the iceberg > that breaks surface. It does, however, seem reasonable to draw severe conclusions when one finds that even the instruments of investigation set up to deal with official abuses, were turned into means of raising a little more money either for an impoverished regime or its more rapacious supporters<sup>5</sup>.

From these short and scattered reflections (born, I can at least plead, of attempted practice and not only of theoretical schematisation) is it possible to approach any nearer towards a sociology of institutions? What follows are meant only as the most tentative suggestions, on which others will undoubtedly be able to elaborate and improve.

(1) Any study of a single institution or a system of institutions must locate this firmly in its general historical context.

This will be achieved partly by a good all-round knowledge and understanding of the period and country in question; partly by a knowledge of comparable institutions and their history in other countries during the same period, or in the same country at earlier or later dates.

(2) More specifically, one must ask why the institution or system was set up, how and why it evolved in the way it did, how it was affected by the kind of people who served in it (or by those who upheld it from outside).

Conversely one must also ask what influence it had on the general pattern of social and political development, both through its effect on its own staff and those associated with them, and on those who came within the scope of its jurisdiction or other activities.

(3) Finally, without postulating any rigid antithesis, there may sometimes be a distinction to be drawn: between institutions or systems of administration where it is easier to measure the effect these have had upon the general evolution of the societies of which they formed a part, and those where the opposite is true, where the institution or system seems — as it were — more acted upon than acting.

5. See G. E. AYLMER *Charles I's Commission on Fees 1627-1640*, in « *BullIHRes* » 31 (1958) 58-67, and *The King's Servants. The civil Service of Charles I. 1625-1642* (London 1961) 182-203. See also, for a more favourable view based on the same materials, J. S. WILSON *Sir Henry Spelman and the Royal Commission on Fees*, in *Studies presented to Sir Hilary Jenkinson* Ed. J. C. Davies (Oxford 1957) 456-470.



G. E. Aylmer

This issue is at its sharpest in recent controversies concerning the Court, bureaucracy and office-holding in 16th- and 17th-century Europe. This can be seen in the provocative and stimulating articles by Professor Trevor-Roper and others on the nature of the alleged crisis in mid-17th century Europe<sup>6</sup>. Too often, especially in England, such discussions have been conducted without sufficient preliminary research; on the other hand, some of those who have undertaken the more detailed work have failed to ask themselves the most significant questions of their materials.

Having myself been criticised, for having reached (in some respects) negative conclusions, even though on the basis of detailed empirical research, for having been <too sociological> and for having shown an <anti-sociological> bias, I may perhaps end by saying that the lot of the would-be administrative historian is not always an easy one! None the less I believe that this branch of historical science offers an exciting and rewarding approach to the understanding of human society. And it is a compelling intellectual challenge, both to established historians and to students of the rising generation.

6. H. R. TREVOR-ROPER *The General Crisis of the 17th Century*, in «*Past and Present*» 16 (1959) 31-64; E. H. KOSSMANN - E. J. HOBBSBAWM - J. H. HEXTER - R. MOUSNIER - J. H. ELLIOTT - L. STONE *Trevor-Roper's «General Crisis»*, in «*Past and Present*» 18 (1960) 8-33; H. R. TREVOR-ROPER *Reply*, in «*Past and Present*» 18 (1960) 34-42.